



A message from  
**Hugh Gaitskell**  
to trade unionists

A SPEECH TO DELEGATES AT THE TRADES UNION CONGRESS September 10th 1959







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# The opportunity

FOUR WEEKS FROM TODAY the British people have to make a momentous decision. I believe it is vital not only for us in this hall, not only for the British people, but for the whole world, that they decide on that day, four weeks hence, to elect a Labour Government.

I believe it is vital for the world, because, as has been said—and on this I agree with the Prime Minister—important international negotiations are at hand. It seems to me essential that in these negotiations Britain should be represented by a Labour Government. I do not say that because I believe that the return of a Labour Government is a kind of automatic 'Open Sesame' which in a few moments will solve all the problems of the world. No sane or sensible person with any knowledge of international affairs would make such a claim. But I will tell you nevertheless why I do regard it as very, very essential at this moment that there should be a change in the direction of our foreign policy.

## Nuclear tests

I believe that we are about to enter upon a period of opportunity in international relations. I believe that there is a chance in the next few weeks or months for the two great blocs into which the world is divided, to come together and successfully solve some of their problems—a chance which may not come again if we do not take it now. I believe this new period has emerged, partly because of certain changes in the attitude of the Soviet Government, and partly because of certain changes in the attitude of Western Governments, changes which I claim have been very largely inspired and encouraged by the British Labour Party.

As you know, we have recently been to the Soviet Union. We had a very interesting time. I said last night on television in relation to our talks with Mr. Khrushchev and his colleagues, that although there are important differences between us, nevertheless there are areas of potential agreement; of that I am absolutely certain. If these areas of potential agreement are to be exploited and converted, so to speak, into concrete practical agreements for the settlement of outstanding disputes, then at the Summit Conference (if that is where the discussions will take place) it is essential that there should be give and take on both

sides. It is essential that the Soviet Union should make its contribution, but it is equally essential that a positive attitude should be adopted by the Western Powers.

Let me elaborate briefly some of the things I said in those few minutes last night on television. First, a word about nuclear tests. I am satisfied that the Russians want an agreement to stop nuclear tests; I do not think there is any doubt about that. We would never have got this far, however, if the Labour Party had not insisted long ago that we should accept the idea of a separate agreement on tests. We pressed that time and time again, and finally, belatedly, the Western Powers accepted it too last January. Then progress became possible. Nor should we have got this far in the negotiations if the West had stuck to their original view, that the agreement to suspend nuclear tests should be for one year or maybe two years alone. Again it was the Labour Party which said, 'No, if the Soviet Union are prepared to agree to it, make it an agreement to last for ever.' Again, eventually and belatedly, the Western Powers agreed to this last January. There are still outstanding points, points of a technical character, which, however, undoubtedly lie on top of political difficulties. I will not go into them now, I will only repeat that give and take on both sides is essential.

## Minimum demand

I know that you have been discussing here in your Congress some of these problems and the attitude which the Movement should adopt towards the banning of nuclear tests. At present we have the Americans who have said there will be no more tests as far as they are concerned until the end of the year; we have the British Government, the Tory Government, who have said there will be no more tests as far as they are concerned so long as negotiations continue. You know, the Soviet Government have gone further than that: they have said there will be no more tests as far as they are concerned, unless and until somebody else starts them up again. I cannot see why the British Government should not at least go as far as that. That is the minimum demand that we make.

However, I do not want to exaggerate the significance of this possible agreement between the three nuclear powers, important



as it is, because it is only going to be between three powers. There are other countries in the world which are contemplating making nuclear tests, and we said to the Soviet Government: 'Why have you not thought about this problem? Has it been discussed at all? Have you contemplated what you are going to say to these other countries?' And they had to admit, with the British Government and the American Government, that nothing had been done about it. We pointed to the position of France. We said: 'You know, the French are saying they are determined to carry out their tests. Can you tell us, supposing the French do this, what effect it will have on the agreement?' They could not say, nor could the British Government. This problem has simply been ignored by the Great Powers; but it is far too dangerous to ignore any longer.

### Non-nuclear club

I know also that you have been discussing the so-called non-nuclear club. I want to say this in all seriousness and sincerity. After we had considered this problem, about which, as you say, Mr. President, it is quite reasonable we should argue, we came to the conclusion on the facts available to us that while it is vital to get agreement on nuclear tests between the three powers, and while our supreme objective must remain and always will remain all-round comprehensive disarmament, covering every power and every kind of weapon—conventional and nuclear weapons, the whole lot—nevertheless, we face the danger that if the negotiations to get a comprehensive disarmament agreement are long and difficult, as they are certainly going to be—and the Soviet authorities do not deny this—then there is the real danger that meanwhile not only France, but other countries as well might develop their own nuclear weapons.

We expanded our case and our anxieties at length, first to Mr. Gromyko and then to Mr. Khrushchev, and I can tell you this: they did not take the view that this was an unimportant matter. On the contrary, so far as the danger of the spread is concerned, they were wholly with us. I want to see a Labour Government in Britain, for this reason: that we can put forward, advance, argue and negotiate the only proposals so far on the stocks to stop the nuclear arms race and the spread of nuclear weapons to one country and one Government after another.

There was a third field on which we found much agreement, and that concerned Europe and Germany. We said to them: 'We have put forward plans for what we call disengagement in Central Europe. We need not discuss the whole of those; they are long-term plans. But there is one immediate step which we believe should be taken, and that is the establishment of a zone

of controlled disarmament in Central Europe.'

Why do we place such emphasis upon that? There are two reasons. The first is because they—the Soviet Union—are concerned, as indeed many of us here are still concerned and unhappy, about the rearmament of Germany. I do not deny the concern, whatever our views may be of what should be done. But we said to them, 'If you are concerned about this, you cannot isolate the problem; you have to take it in the context of European security as a whole.' And what is the best way to deal with it? Surely, if you can get a zone of controlled disarmament which covers, if possible, both East and West Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, you have really dealt with that problem. It would be controlled and inspected internationally, guaranteed by the Great Powers. That was one reason.

The second reason is that here is something which, as far as I can see, it ought to be in the interests of both sides to follow up. I have said many times in the House of Commons and we said it to the Russians again—that if you are serious about negotiations you must put forward proposals which do not obviously give an advantage to your own side and a disadvantage to the other side, because you will never get them to accept that. But here is something where you can begin from the present dividing line and say: 'Right, we will have an area, equal on both sides, of controlled disarmament.' Where is the disadvantage to anybody in that? On the contrary, it is a real step forward to peace and, incidentally, a pilot scheme for a more comprehensive and far-reaching plan of disarmament with controls, which, of course, must, as I have said, remain our main objective.

### Zone of disarmament

But again, what is the history of this proposal? It is we who have advanced it. For years the present Tory Government were against this kind of thing until an election was coming along and they thought they had better be a bit careful. So it was mentioned in the communique in Moscow. But has it been followed up? Not a word about it in the Geneva Conference. Is the West in favour of it? Have the British Government tried even to persuade the Americans and the other Western Governments in favour? There is no sign of this.

We need a Labour Government to get this zone of controlled disarmament established in Central Europe and so to take another step forward to peace.

We need a Government that believes in certain principles in international affairs; that believes, for instance, that the United Nations Charter is not just a scrap of paper; that believes that it is, on the contrary, a code of good conduct which every nation



which is a member of the United Nations is pledged to follow. We need a Government that could never, in any circumstances, commit the disastrous folly of Suez.

There are other issues in overseas affairs—in colonial policy, where, I think, this country may be faced with very vital decisions within the next few years. I am thinking, of course, particularly of Central Africa. Now this is not the occasion nor is there time for me to recite, as we have done in the House of Commons, the long train of disastrous errors made by the Tory Government on that matter. I would state only certain simple principles which I believe a Government of Britain which is to solve this problem must follow. They are principles in which I feel sure every man and woman in this hall believes.

### Three principles

First of all there is the principle that no country and no Government has the right permanently to rule over the peoples of another country and keep them as subject races. Second, there is the principle that if we believe for ourselves in the principles of democracy, based on 'one man, one vote,' we cannot deny this principle to other people over whom at the moment we have control. And the third principle is the principle of absolute non-discrimination in race relations.

You know very well that in these matters the record of the Labour Party speaks for itself. There is no action of the last Labour Government which evokes greater enthusiasm in a Labour audience than the fact that we granted independence and freedom to nearly 500 million people in India, Burma, Pakistan and Ceylon. I have been in India, where they have said to me at conferences there, when we have discussed these bitter problems of colonialism and anti-colonialism: 'We believe you when you say that you are going to bring freedom and independence to the other colonies, because you kept your promises to us.' I was very proud of that. And we shall keep our promises too and we shall bring freedom and independence, on the basis of full democracy and racial non-discrimination, to the remaining colonies in our colonial territories.

Let me turn very briefly to the home front, because of course we are not only concerned with foreign and colonial policy. We are going to settle in this election what is going to be done for the old age pensioners; those who are old age pensioners today and those who are going to be old age pensioners in the future. I met some of them outside this hall, as I was coming in. They were very kind, and they gave me a very friendly reception.

We have come to the conclusion it is about time this scandal of the poverty of old

age was brought to an end. We have our criticisms to make of the Soviet Union. We certainly do not like everything that has happened there. We do not like their political system, and they have a lower standard of living, but you have to hand it to them, because there, as far as I can make out, pretty well everybody gets a pension on retirement which is, roughly speaking, half pay. If they can do that at their lower standard of living, then it is high time we in Britain did it too.

I would urge you not to lose sight of the importance of this issue in the election. I ask you to compare what we are proposing and what we shall carry out in the way of the superannuation plan and the immediate increase in pensions with the miserable half-baked plan which the Tories have produced.

Housing is another issue. Again, I have not time to go into great detail, but I want to say this, representing as I do an industrial constituency. We really cannot have a situation in which the number of houses being built by the local councils is falling year by year. That is what is happening today. When there is still so much overcrowding, when there are still so many slums to be cleared, that is all wrong, but it has happened under the Tories. It has been their deliberate policy.

Then if you talk about people owning their own houses—and I am all in favour of it—you have to do something about it. The one thing that has got to be done about it that means anything is to bring down interest rates and mortgage rates. As you know very well, at the moment people are paying 12s. 6d., 14s. and 15s. a week more in mortgage rates than they were under the Labour Government in 1951. We shall deal with that.

### Homes and rents

Finally, do not forget the older houses. There are streets and streets of them in my constituency. They have no bathrooms, they have outside toilets, but they are fairly strong still. They are going to last 20 or 25 years more, but why should the people living in those five million or six million houses not have the modern amenities to which all the rest of us are now accustomed? You will never get this done under private landlords: you will only get it done if you let the Councils take them over.

Do not forget the rent position either. The Tories have cut down the house building by Councils; they have put up rates of interest; but above all, they have shoved up very sharply the controlled rents, and taken nearly a million houses out of rent control altogether. Believe me if you give them the chance, they are going to get rid of rent control altogether, if they get back.

I will not say more on the social services,



because this is not the occasion for it, but you may say: 'How are we going to do these various things? How are we going to have the pension system we want? How are we going to carry out our fine policy for improving the health service?'

I say frankly to you that this depends upon our country enjoying a period of industrial expansion. As a former Chancellor of the Exchequer I can tell you this simple fact: if we get that expansion the Chancellor does not have to increase taxation, he gets automatically an increase in revenue to pay for the increased social expenditure. That is what we want.

### Plan to expand

What have we had under the Tories? We have had three and a-half years of stagnation, and a brief spurt at the end, but if you imagine this spurt is likely to go on if they are returned into power I would ask you to think again. What happened in 1955? We had a somewhat similar position. There was an election very nicely timed just to catch the boom—and then a crisis in the autumn. This time I suppose it will be a crisis in the spring. It is simply not good enough to have this kind of one step forward, one step back, and two steps sideways—a sort of cha-cha—which is all we get out of the Tories. It is not good enough, for a whole lot of reasons.

I have referred to the Soviet Union. Again, as I say, they are still a long way behind us, but you do get there—make no mistake about it—a steady expansion in output, year after year. They claim 10 per cent a year, and even if you begin from a very low level, that will catch up before very long.

Even now we would not be getting the recovery that has just come so conveniently and is so well-timed if it had not been for the fortuitous advantage of a fall in import prices. It is very convenient, and certainly we are glad of it, but to rely on that as a long-term policy is obvious madness.

What you have had during this period are spasmodic, jerky advances, long periods of stagnation, and a very good time for a very small number of people. I reckon the value of ordinary shares on the Stock Exchange is up by £3,000 million since 1955; not a bad figure. That is pretty healthy for those who happen to hold enough of the shares. We all know what happens when the take-over bids get going: a 50 per cent or 60 per cent rise in value and the golden handshake for the people who are pushed out. It is a wonderful life, with an average of £50,000 tax free for the chairman who is pushed out. In eleven cases that is what has happened in the last year or two. Compare that with the £200 for the cotton workers.

We say this policy of industrial stagnation and industrial anarchy is wrong, stupid and

unfair. We have got to have something else. We have got to have planned expansion, with the gains fairly shared, and the tax burdens readjusted. That is what we are going to get under a Labour Government.

Yes, the tax burdens will be readjusted. We shall put a tax on capital gains, we shall stop the evasions on death duties, and we shall also stop the expenses racket. That will enable us to lift the burden of taxation, which is heavy, off those who really earn their money properly, who earn it in the ordinary, decent way, by the sweat of their hands or by their brains. This goes too, let me say, not only for manual workers, but for scientists, professional people, and people in management, who are doing a good job and on whom we also depend.

If we are to get this industrial expansion in a planned economy, the trade unions cannot contract out of it. It cannot be done without the co-operation of the trade unions. You may say that is very troublesome, that it is difficult, and I do not deny it, but if I may say so to you, the Trade Union Movement has a choice here between either co-operating with a government which is determined to carry out industrial expansion in a planned way, without inflation, or it will be driven back to an inactive role, kept quiet by a certain amount of unemployment, and not wielding any serious influence in the community but doing the very minimum that is necessary.

I can see, human nature being what it is, some people may feel: 'Well, that is all right,' but it is not all right. It is not all right, and it is not good enough for Britain today, because Britain must have the expansion, and it is not good enough for a Labour Movement which is based on the principle of fair shares; so we have got to have that co-operation.

### Unions and Party

I read a certain amount in the newspapers about the trade unions and the Labour Party. This attempt at giving advice, you know, is an old game. They tell you, 'Wouldn't it really be rather better if you kept out of politics altogether? Wouldn't it be rather better if you had no contact with the Labour Party?' They say, 'After all, you have to work with any government.' Of course you do. You always have and you will. But they tell us at the same time that it is really a great handicap to the Labour Party to have anything to do with the trade unions. Don't let us be taken in by this sort of thing.

Let me state very plainly what, as I see it, the true relationship is between the trade unions and the Labour Party. It is quite simple. We are part of the same great Labour Movement of Britain. We are comrades together, but we have different jobs to do. You have your industrial job



and we have our political job. We do not dictate to one another. I should get the brush off pretty quickly if I started trying to dictate to Bob Willis. And, believe me, any leader of the Labour Party would not be worth his salt if he allowed himself to be dictated to by the trade unions.

I have been leader of the Party for nearly four years now, and I have been in the Labour Party for some time fairly prominently. I have never known an occasion when any trade union leader or any collective body of trade unionists ever attempted to dictate to the Labour Party at all. Let us put that on the record. What we do get and what we shall have is the two bodies working together, and we shall get that for the simple reason, as you said, Mr. President, we happen to have common aims and because it is in our interest to work with you and in your interest to work with us.

### **For and against**

When I speak of 'you' and 'us' it always seems to be slightly absurd, because of the intimate relationship.

That brings me finally to say something about those common aims. I call them the aims of democratic socialism. They are the aims that inspire us. I will tell you what I think of them, how I see them, what we are for and what we are against, because this, fundamentally, is also what the election is about.

We are against the stuffed shirt snobbery that still disfigures our society in Britain. We are against the kind of class relationships which unfortunately also are still very evident in this country. We are in favour of people having normal, friendly, gay, happy relations with one another because they judge each other on their merits as

human beings. We are against a materialistic anarchy where the only criterion by which you judge people is the amount of private wealth they happen to have, however they happen to have come by it. We are in favour on the contrary of a planned advance to prosperity by everyone. We are against out-of-date jingoism when it results, as it does sooner or later, in gunboat diplomacy. But we are in favour of a sane, tolerant, good-neighbour policy which leads the world to peace. We are proud, not of conquest, but of having evolved from an empire to a peaceful commonwealth of nations of self-governing peoples.

These are the things for which we stand in the trade unions and the Labour Party. These are the things for which we have worked in the past. Much has been achieved, but if we believe in these principles now, as we do, and we want to achieve them fully and make them a reality, it is no use just passing resolutions, it is no use even just having demonstrations, encouraging and heartening as they are. We shall only get these things if we work and if we fight for them. We shall only get these things if every one of us dedicates himself to getting them.

### **Hour of decision**

Four weeks from now the decision will be taken. This is our hour, this is our chance, our opportunity. We must not fail. This is vital for the whole Labour Movement of Britain, and not only for us, because all over the world millions of people are watching and waiting and hoping; above all in Africa and in Asia and in Europe our comrades are hoping and praying for a great Labour victory. We must not let them down. Let us, then, be worthy of a great past, and by a victory won in unity build a great future for Britain and peace for the world.

*The President of the Trades Union Congress,  
Mr. Robert Willis, declared: Further words  
are unnecessary and would only spoil  
a fine inspiring speech.  
All I am going to do is to assure you  
that you have our full support  
and that we will be with you in the struggle.*